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The Early Feminist Writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf:

Style Across Fictional, Non-Fictional, & Autobiographical Works

Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf are two of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ most famed feminist writers. Gilman wrote prolifically in both fiction and nonfiction genres, often around themes of gender, domesticity, and social reform. She is most famous for her short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, which follows a woman with postpartum depression and her worsening mental state, and was very closely inspired by her lived experience with the “rest cure.” Similarly, Woolf sought to reflect her experiences with gender and her creative career in various fiction and nonfiction works, most famously *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, the later reflecting in theme and content her feelings on her parents’ deaths. Both writers produced well-known and well received works illuminating the experiences of women by drawing on their own life experiences, blurring the line, in certain ways, between lived experience and fictional worlds, perhaps the root of the impact of their writing. However, the semi-autobiographical nature of their corpuses, emphasized particularly in the contexts of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *To the Lighthouse*, serve as prime study material for the relationship between fiction and nonfiction as literary genres. Specifically, I am interested in the relationship between the consistency or differentiation of writing style across single authors’ corpuses of both fiction and nonfiction works.

As such, I propose a project using digital humanities tools and quantitative methods to address the questions: How do Charlotte Perkin Gilman’s and Virgina Woolf’s writing styles change across their fictional, non-fiction, and autobiographical writings? Through examining this question, I hope to gain insight into how writing on similar and semi-autobiographical themes influences potential relationships between genre and style, as well as open data-based pathways to explore potential implications on Gilman and Woolf’s relationships with writing and primary concern of gender in the nineteenth and twentieth century contexts in which they lived.

This project will contribute a data-minded perspective, primarily through the use of stylometry, to current scholarship on text variety within Gilman and Woolf’s fiction, nonfiction, and autobiographical writing, which focus mainly on content and how the creation of certain works coincided with events in their lives. In particular, scholar Anne Fernald provided crucial context for working with Woolf’s corpus by examining the autobiographical elements of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* in comparison to Woolf’s diary in personal writings.[[1]](#footnote-0) Similarly, Ray Monk’s writing on Woolf’s own understanding of the genre of biography in the relation to fiction–exemplified in her nonfiction piece *The New Biography* and her fiction book *Orlando: A Biography*–which motivates me to explore whether Woolf’s fiction and autobiographical writing styles are particularly close (if indistinguishable at all).[[2]](#footnote-1) For Gilman, I believe that examining her stylistic variety amongst genres will contribute in particular to theories about the reception of *The Yellow Wallpaper* by determining if this short story is more stylistically similar to her personal and autobiographical writing. From a digital humanities perspective, focusing on text variety, I will build on the work of Julie Bates Dock and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, who both write on the history of *The Yellow Wallpaper* in the context of Gilman’s biography.[[3]](#footnote-2) Overall, my work with the corpuses and existing scholarship will have implications on Gilman and Woolf scholarship, but also on conversations about autobiographical novels and genre. Exploring whether Gilman and Woolf’s fiction are clearly distinguishable from each other may shed additional light on “blurred” lines between genres, entering into conversations of fiction in autobiographical writing and vice versa.[[4]](#footnote-3)

I hypothesize that stylometric analysis and topic modeling will reveal Gilman’s writing style to be largely similar across her fiction, nonfiction, and autobiographical works, and the same as Woolf's corpus. In addition to scholarship about the direct relationship between Gilman and Woolf’s fiction and lived experience, style tends to be grounded in “small” details–use of function words, sentence length and structure–that may not be dependent on genre. While I believe that their fiction writing will contain more descriptive and embellishing words, and the nonfiction and autobiography will have particular reliance on content words, the roots of each author’s style may remain quite similar. If significant stylistic disparities emerge, then this will have particularly interesting implications on how fiction, even when semi-autobiographical, distinctly changes an author’s voice.

To carry out the analysis of Gilman and Woolf’s works, I will use digitizations of comprehensive selections from their larger list of works. Many of Gilman’s short stories, novels, and nonfiction works are available in the public domain from Project Gutenberg. From Project Gutenberg, my selections of works will include the fictional works *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1899), *What Diantha Did* (1910), *Moving the Mountain* (1911), *The Crux* (1911), *Benigna Machiavelli* (1916), *Herland* (1915), and *With Her in Ourland* (1916) and the nonfiction works *Women and Economics* (1898), *Concerning Children* (1900), *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903), *Human Work* (1904), and *Our Androcentric Culture* (1911). Gilman’s autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (1935), a particularly important work for the project, is not available in the public domain; copyright permissions would be obtained from the owners. Many of Woolf’s works, similarly, are in the public domain and additional copyright permissions for her autobiographical essays would be arranged. Available publicly on Project Gutenberg Australia, Woolf’s fiction works include: *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), *The Waves* (1931), *Flush: A Biography* (1933), *The Years* (1936), and *Between the Acts* (1941). Her nonfiction works include *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), *The Common Reader: First Series* (1925), *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1935) and a collection of autobiographical writings called *Moments of Being* (1972) (*Moments of Being* requires copyright permissions). Interestingly, many of Woolf’s works, including *Flush: A Biography* and some lectures, deal explicitly with the conventions of biography through fictional writing, or use semi-fictional styles within nonfiction works.[[5]](#footnote-4)

I want to be comprehensive when considering the works of Gilman and Woolf, and therefore choose a significant portion of their published works. Though available, I have not included letters, works-in-progress, or otherwise unofficial writing samples of the writer’s works. Additionally, there is an imbalance between the quantity of fiction versus nonfiction works–especially autobiographical nonfiction–and I will attempt to mitigate such imbalance by using 1000-word samples from each work of fiction and larger samples from the nonfiction works, which I break down in further detail below. Overall, the selection is meant to represent the writers’ style across their careers, as opposed to focusing solely on their famous or particularly semi-autobiographical works, allowing for both longitudinal study of style over time as well as opportunities for comparison between style and genre from a bird’s-eye view and in direct reference to *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *To the Lighthouse*.

In approaching this project, my main tools of choice will be R’s Stylo program and Voyant Tools. Stylo, traditionally used for authorship attribution, is useful for understanding the stylistic similarity between Gilman and Woolf’s works of fiction and nonfiction, and I will use Voyant Tools for topic modeling. Though I will primarily focus on using Stylo, topic modeling will also allow for better conceptualization of the comparative importance of function and content words in fiction versus autobiography and greater insight into the chronological relationship between the writers’ biographies and fictional writing content regarding theme and content, providing additional data-grounded perspective of each writer’s works. Both tools will produce both quantitative data and data visualizations.

I will first compile digitized texts of each work into readable files, removing metadata such as copyright information. In my second step of preparation, I will chunk the texts into manageable sizes for the Stylo program. In order to balance the quantity of fiction versus autobiography and nonfiction in the prepared corpus, I will take 1000 word samples from Gilman’s seven fiction works and 1400 word samples from Gilman’s nonfiction works. For Woolf’s corpus, I will take 1000 word samples from each of her eight fiction works and 2000 words from three of her nonfiction works.

I plan to approach my analysis in two primary phases. The first concerns Gilman’s corpus. After putting the Gilman corpus into Stylo, I will first compare the closeness of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Women and Economics* to consider Gilman’s fictional and nonfictional writing from around the same time in her career. I will also compare them in Voyant Tools, looking specifically at the difference in function and content words. If embellishing words are more present in Gilman’s fiction, this could provide some insight into Gilman’s relationship with fiction writing for future projects. This analysis with Stylo and Voyant Tools will serve as a “control,” in a way, for the work dealing with Gilman’s different genres, providing insight into the core differences–and similarities–being Gilman’s early writing style under similar themes in both fiction and nonfiction works.

Then, I will examine *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Gilman’s autobiography, having established some understanding of the initial relationship between her fiction and nonfiction style towards the beginning of her writing career. Since *The Yellow Wallpaper* is Gilman’s most famously semi-autobiographical piece of fiction, considering the closeness in style of these two works lends crucial insights into the text variety studying aiming to further conversation regarding the relationship between semi-autobiographical fiction and autobiography. Lastly, I will test Gilman's corpus holistically: can stylometry differentiate between fiction, non-fiction, and autobiography when all deal with similar themes and experiences? Together with my use of Stylo, I will also place Gilman’s corpus as a whole in Voyant Tools to look into the role of function words in fiction, autobiography, and non-fiction to determine how the use content words change, and whether use of content words cause considerable distance between one writers’ works of different genres.

The second phase of the project concerns Woolf’s corpus. As with Gilman’s corpus, I will begin by putting Woolf’s corpus into Stylo and considering the relationship between *To the Lighthouse* and *A Room of One’s Own*, published within two years of each other. This will provide comparative grounding in the similarity between Woolf’s fiction and nonfiction works. I will then conduct further analysis using Voyant Tools. Then, having insight into Woolf’s stylistic tendencies, I will consider the stylometric relationship between *To the Lighthouse* and *Moments of Being* to analyze stylistic relationships between Woolf’s most notably semi-autobiographical work of fiction and her autobiographical writings. Topic modeling will be particularly useful here for gathering data about the individual books. Lastly, as with Gilman, I will compare Woolf’s fiction to her nonfiction at large.

I plan to disseminate these results through a published paper and conference presentation. Primarily, I want the paper to reach scholars of Gilman and Woolf, feminist literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and digital humanities engaged in stylometry and interested in advancing it in relation to text variety and genre studies, even as the tool remains relatively reliable over a long period of time. Ideally, the paper would be open access and the project will also be publicly available on an online platform, featuring the data visualization created in Stylo and Voyant Tools. Ensuring to consider copyright permission when sharing the research results–which may be difficult with the mixture of public and private domain sources in the corpuses–a web page displaying my findings in accessible ways will also require some maintenance, but since the page would comprise largely of text and images rather than interactive visualizations, the webpage would be sustainable. Since the project as a whole would not be interactive and ongoing data collection or visualization, little maintenance is required overall.

I also acknowledge that Gilman and Woolf have been given much scholarly attention in regards to their literature and contributions to early feminism, sometimes at the cost of other marginalized women writers. In this project, I would aim to include a diverse research team who would aim to apply the implications of the project to non-canonical writers of the time period to better understand the stories of feminist writers that are hidden in history.

With the results of my research project, I hope to provide data-backed points of entry into further exploration of genre in early feminist literature. In the future, digital and traditional humanities can contextualize the quantitative findings of the project within the social, political, and economic nineteenth and twentieth century contexts in which Gilman and Woolf lived. They can consider to greater extent whether, for example, stylistic similarities between fiction and autobiography were more common in their historical context, or if semi-autobiographical works of fiction were pervasive among women writers–at least, those who we know of.

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**Honor Code**

This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

/s/ Talia Goldman

1. Anne E. Fernald. “To the Lighthouse In the Context of Virginia Woolf’s Diaries and Life.” In *The Cambridge Companion to To The Lighthouse*, edited by Allison Pease, 6–18. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge University Press, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Ray Monk. "This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography, Reality, and Character." Philosophy and Literature 31, no. 1 (2007): 1-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Wild Unrest Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Making of “The Yellow Wall-Paper.”* New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

   Julie Bates Dock, “The Legend of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” *Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and the History of Its Publication and Reception : A Critical Edition and Documentary Casebook*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. See Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Wolfgang Görtschacher, *Fiction and Autobiography: Modes and Models of Interaction*. Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 2006.

   See also Siddharth Srikanth, "Fictionality and Autofiction." Style (University Park, PA) 53, no. 3, 2019, 344-363. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Monk, “This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography and Reality,” 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)